

Eightfold Path – Introduction (2 of 2)

October 27, 2020

Keyword Summary

sammā, non-clinging, craving, eight-factored path, *dukkha*, enlightenment, awakened, suffering, right view, right intention, right consideration, right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, right concentration.

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Greetings, and welcome to the second talk on the Eightfold Path. This will be another introductory talk and then tomorrow I'll start on the first factor of the path.

The essence of the first factor of the path has to do with understanding suffering. We are to understand the arising or the appearance of suffering, the cessation of suffering, and how to be free of suffering. The Eightfold Path is a path that is walked in relation to freedom from suffering.

Yesterday, I talked about two general ways in which the Eightfold Path exists for people. One is that it is the path people who are awakened walk. The second is that it is the path people on the way to awakening walk. Awakening and enlightenment are vague terms, but their essence is freedom from suffering. Those who are free from suffering walk this path. Those who are on their way to freedom walk this path.

It is the same path, but it is fully developed in the awakened ones, while it is being cultivated and developed by those on the way to awakening, to freedom from suffering. Interestingly, it is the same path. This points to a principle that is very important and important for me to try to convey as a teacher: it is important to not set up a strong separation between where we're going in practice – freedom from suffering, being awake or enlightened – and the practice along the way.

Understanding the qualities of a heart and mind that is free of suffering helps us to not create a strong separation. We want to have those qualities and practice those qualities as we walk the path. We want to have aspects of awakening in how we practice, even as a beginner. The means, the practice, should contain a bit of the goal. The means don't justify the goal. The goal informs the means – how we practice.

A couple of examples include: to be generous, one practices generosity, and to be kind, one practices kindness. One achieves the goal of being generous by being generous. If the goal is to be kind, we practice this by being kind.

Our goal is to *become* the Eightfold Path. Someone who is fully awakened is said to have become the Eightfold Path, or to be endowed with or have entered the Eightfold Path. The way to become such a person is to practice the Eightfold Path. A different way to say this is that the freedom from suffering is synonymous with the freedom from clinging. Clinging is the source, the cause, and the condition for suffering. Without clinging, the suffering that Buddhism addresses would not exist. The suffering – the *dukkha* – that Buddhism addresses is that which arises from clinging.

It is popular in our culture to refer to different kinds of emotional pain as suffering. Some of them do not arise from clinging, and a liberated person would feel them too. Those who are liberated have freedom from clinging. As we practice the path of awakening, we want to bring that sense of non-clinging into the practice itself.

All along the way, we want to practice non-clinging. We do not want to cling to Buddhism, to the Eightfold Path, or the different factors of the Eightfold Path. We practice them with devotion and dedication, but we hold them lightly and openly. We try not to live with strong, compulsive desires, expectations, or demands around this path. There is not a lot of comparative thinking (“Someone else is further along the path than me”). There is not a lot of ego involved (“Look at me, I'm the great one who is on the Eightfold Path”). All those represent forms of clinging.

We try to be sensitive from the beginning of our practice to the role that clinging has in our suffering. From the very beginning, we practice non-clinging, even if it's just a modicum of it. This might seem simple, but it includes not clinging to how we cling. We try to not be caught up in desires and craving, such as wanting it gone, not wanting to show people that we are this way, and not having aversion to aversion.

There is an art of cultivating awareness that lets things be but doesn't feed them or fuel them. That is the task of non-clinging.

The Eightfold Path is how an enlightened person walks who has no clinging. For someone who is on the path to awakening, it is how they cultivate non-clinging. They cultivate non-clinging by having what is called "right view, right intention (right consideration), right speech, right action, right livelihood, right effort, right mindfulness, and right concentration."

The word "fold" in the Eightfold Path refers to the idea that it is all one thing that has different folds in it. The more proper translation to English from Pali is "the eight-factored path." It is a singular path but has all these different aspects. Those aspects live together in harmony. We can, but don't need to, practice one factor after the other. The idea is that they all are expressions of the same thing – non-clinging. That is one of the tasks – to understand how these factors are an expression of non-clinging.

These eight factors of the path use the word "right" in front of each one. The Pali word is *sammā*. This word has several different meanings. It can also mean "complete". So, it would be the complete view, complete intention or consideration, and the complete speech. It can mean "harmonious". It is that which is harmonious. What is it in harmony with? It is in harmony with the other factors. It is in harmony with non-clinging.

The ancient etymology of this word precedes the Buddha. It means "coming along together." These different factors come along together. The meaning of *sammā* is that the factors come along together in the same direction, and for the same purpose.

The word "right" can be a fine translation. I like this translation if we understand "right" in the sense of using the right tool. We don't want to use a hammer to unscrew a screw. We would use a screwdriver. The screwdriver is the right tool. The hammer might be the right tool for nailing in a nail.

These eight factors or eight sets of practices are the appropriate tools or means for not only becoming awake or enlightened but also for living a life of awakening. This is an important distinction. Buddhism is not just about becoming an enlightened person for its own sake, so we can become enlightened and live in enlightened retirement. The practice of Buddhism is to transform the person to live a life that is an expression of freedom and non-clinging.

It transforms all of who we are. Our entire way of being in the world is changed and comes into harmony along with non-clinging, with freedom. These eight factors are both practices to do, and they are also wonderful questions and explorations around the topic of non-clinging.

How can our speech be informed by and done without any clinging? How can our actions in our world be right actions, in the sense that they are actions without clinging? What does clinging have to do with it? What does clinging have to do with livelihood, effort, or right mindfulness? How does right mindfulness come along? How is that an expression of non-clinging? How does concentration become an expression of non-clinging?

The idea is that the eight factors of this path are the discovery and the expression of non-clinging. They help us discover it and help us to express it, to be it. How does that work? Why is it that non-clinging is so valuable in this sense? What is it about non-clinging that provides these wonderful eight qualities for a human being? Why should you want it?

This is the introduction to the Noble Eightfold Path – The Eight-Factored Path of the Noble Ones, the non-clinging ones. Tomorrow we will start with the first factor of the path – The Right View – and we'll go from there.

Thank you.